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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Reps. Ann Kirkpatrick, Jim Matheson and Ben Ray Luján are joining together to help Diné children get the education they need, as they introduced the Indian School Bus Route Safety Reauthorization Act of 2009 today. The legislation will continue a program that improves school bus routes on Navajo Nation for six more years.

More than two-thirds of public roads on the Nation, stretching more than 6,500 miles and serving dozens of communities, are unpaved. As a result they become impassable far too easily, especially during rainy or snowy weather. This poses many challenges for the Diné, but primary among them is that buses often simply cannot get through to bring kids to school safely. Navajo children repeatedly find themselves stranded without a way to get to the classroom and their teachers.

The Indian School Bus Route Maintenance Program was established in 1998 to address this issue. As a result of this program, the Federal Highway Administration has distributed \$1.8 million annually to help Arizona, New Mexico and Utah counties improve the routes so that the buses can drive where they are needed. It expires at the end of the current fiscal year, and the Indian School Bus Route Safety Reauthorization Act will ensure Navajo children can benefit from it for years to come.

**“While there are major challenges to getting an education on the Nation, the Diné people are committed to making sure their children and the younger generation can succeed,” said Rep. Kirkpatrick.**

**“This common sense measure helps clear a major obstacle to kids on Navajo Nation arriving at school safely and getting that education. Our bill ensures that folks in our district can continue to improve their quality of life.”**

**“The only thing worse than a long bus ride for a child is an impassable bus route. This program is making travel safer and more reliable but we still have more to do,” said Rep. Matheson.**

**“While traveling the Navajo Nation and visiting with community leaders and constituents in my district, I have heard many concerns about safety issues relating to road infrastructure—especially in areas that are frequently traveled by school buses,” said Rep. Luján.**

**“More specifically, many times Navajo children are unable to travel to school safely on roads that are dangerous or impassable. This legislation will respond to the needs of the Navajo Nation by reauthorizing funds for the improvement of roads that are traveled by Navajo school children.”**

Maintaining school bus routes is uniquely difficult for Navajo Nation, which is larger than 10 states and is by far the largest tribal area in the nation. It comprises a significant portion of multiple counties in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, limiting their tax base and making it hard for them to afford proper improvements.

Many of the roads that these school buses must travel on are state- and county-maintained, so they are not eligible for federal funding through the Bureau of Indian Affairs to make up for any shortfalls. The Indian School Bus Route Maintenance Program has helped fill the gap for the last 11 years.

The reauthorization effort is supported by Members of both houses and both parties. A similar bill has been introduced in the Senate by Sens. Robert Bennett (R-UT), Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), Orrin Hatch (R-UT), Jon Kyl (R-AZ) and Mark Udall (D-CO).